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## Safe at Home? Narratives of Reintegrated Victims of Child Trafficking from Lake Volta, Ghana

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## Introduction

Internal trafficking of children in Ghana has been a critical issue in need of attention for decades. Johansen<sup>[1]</sup> described the incidence as overwhelming. Avenues of child exploitation within the country include stone quarries,<sup>[2]</sup> fishing on Lake Volta,<sup>[3-5]</sup> as well as street hawking.<sup>[6]</sup> Internationally, the Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>[7]</sup> to which Ghana is a signatory, prohibits the exploitation of children through labor. Similarly, within the African subregion, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children,<sup>[8]</sup> under article XV, clause 1, prohibits child labor. Internally, the Children's Act of Ghana<sup>[9]</sup> and the Human Trafficking Act<sup>[10]</sup> both criminalized child exploitation.

For instance, the Human Trafficking Act 2005 of Ghana defines exploitation as "at the minimum, induced prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs" (Article 1: Clause 2-3). The Children's Act of Ghana further explained under section 91, that while children below 13 years should not be engaged in any work, those at 13 years and above could engage in "light work" (such as sweeping) and 15-year-olds could be gainfully employed in nonhazardous work.<sup>[9]</sup> The International Labour Organization (ILO) under article 3, clause d, qualifies labor as exploitative when "it...is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children" engaged in it.<sup>[11]</sup>

Despite the existence of legal instruments, several children are reported to be in one form of exploitative labor or the other. According to the United States Department of Labor, 24.7% of children between the ages of 5 and 14 years are engaged in the worst forms of labor such as fishing and cocoa harvesting due to trafficking within Ghana.<sup>[12]</sup> It is also noted that 25.3% of children between the ages of 7 and 14 combine labor with education. Basic education, which spans 6 years of primary school and 3 years of junior high school (JHS) in Ghana, is compulsory and government supported.<sup>[13]</sup> Ampiah et al.,<sup>[14]</sup> however, suggest that not all children who enrol in primary school are able to complete or even continue to JHS. According to the Consortium for Educational Access, Transitions and Equity,<sup>[13]</sup> the school dropout rate in Ghana is higher among rural children than among children in urban areas.

In its 2014 demographic and health survey, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) noted that generally, 74% of females and 80% of males aged 15-24 have access to education to the secondary school level. Urban dwellers, however, have a higher percentage in terms of access than those in rural areas. For instance, though nationally 70% of 6- to 11-year-olds were in primary school, in terms of urban and rural settlement, 74% of children in urban areas have access, compared with 64% in rural Ghana.<sup>[15]</sup> At the secondary school level, a national rate of 39% of 12- to 17-year-olds were in school, with a rural rate of 32% versus 46% for urban areas. The rate of completion of 99% recorded for the primary level dropped to 50% for the secondary school level at the time of reporting.<sup>[15]</sup> This suggests that, while more children complete their primary education, half of those who continue to the secondary school stage drop out. The Gender Parity Index (GPI), however, shows 1.0 rate of females against the male population and GPI rate of 1.01 in the same manner at the secondary school level.<sup>[15]</sup>

Enrolment in school has been one of the main factors used by fishermen and parents to lure children into trafficking on Lake Volta. Although there is a free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (fCUBE) for all children of school age in Ghana, petty levies from local school authorities for some administration purposes are imposed on children to

be paid by their parents.<sup>[13]</sup> Mostly, these levies come in the form of costs for printing services for examination purposes and levies from the Parents Teachers Association (PTA). With the existence of these levies, most rural children still stand the risk of not accessing education irrespective of the national policies. In collaboration with local school authorities, anti-trafficking agencies can absorb these levies for children rescued and reintegrated into local communities.

In terms of trafficking, there are no reliable figures on child trafficking within Ghana. This could be attributed to the nonexistence of a national collation platform. However, the International Justice Mission (IJM)<sup>[4]</sup> noted that 771 children were exploited on Lake Volta in 2013 and of this number 444 (57.6%) were trafficked. Six years later, a documentary - "Child slaves risk their lives on Ghana's Lake Volta" - estimated there are 20,000 children in exploitation on Lake Volta.<sup>[3]</sup> Figures such as those of IJM are mostly based on organizational rescue missions.

In Ghana, several local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are involved in rescuing, rehabilitating, and reintegrating trafficked children. There is, however, no central organization to monitor and coordinate their activities. While some NGOs like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) collaborate with the government and other local NGOs, others work independently. Each organization has its own package of services rendered to reintegrated children. For instance, IOM after reintegration monitors the children for 2 1/2 years within which they are placed in either formal or informal education. In addition, an undisclosed capital is made available to the guardian of the child to trade. The proceed of the trade is meant to support the child.<sup>[16]</sup>

Irrespective of the irregularities of the figures noted above, the causes, effects, and interventions of child exploitation have been studied, especially in the fishing industry.<sup>[6],[17]</sup> Most intervention processes end with the children being returned to their local communities but with varying degrees of true reintegration. As suggested by the ILO and the Center for the Protection of Children's Rights Foundation (CPCR),<sup>[18]</sup> intervention for exploitation needs to focus on:

- (a) Fact finding.
- (b) Identification of the abuses suffered by the child, who abused the child, and the child's relationship with the abuser.
- (c) Protection--immediate or short-term placement of the child in a safe environment.
- (d) Rehabilitation--development of rehabilitation plans with regard to facts gathered from the initial fact-finding mission.
- (e) Reintegration--return of the child to his/her parents or community.
- (f) Prevention of re-victimization--establishment of mechanisms to reduce risk factors in the family and community.

Most anti-trafficking agencies adhere to the above principles and in the end reintegrate rescued children with their families or foster parents. To re-establish the children after the period of exploitation, USAID<sup>[19]</sup> recommends that rehabilitation plans include education, provision of economic opportunities, psychosocial support, and a commitment to reintegration as a process and not as an occasion. While education could be both formal and informal, skill training in professions relevant to the existing job market that enables the survivor to earn money towards an independent living is vital. Psychosocial support, on the other hand, needs to be geared towards restoring the self-worth of the survivor destroyed by the violence endured in exploitation.<sup>[19]</sup>

It is therefore important that after the reintegration, the life experiences of the

children are explored and given a voice. Critical studies such as this are a means of enabling anti-trafficking agencies to internally assess their activities to enhance future care for child trafficking survivors. In view of that, the study aimed to find out: (a) how trafficked victims were educationally reintegrated, (b) if reintegration connotes the absence of exploitative work, and (c) if reintegration suggests freedom from other abuses besides exploitative work.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The study was approached phenomenologically by engaging participants in making meaning of their subjective experiences of reintegration with families through in-depth interviews.<sup>[20]</sup> In looking for meanings people give to their daily experiences, Creswell and Poth suggest the qualitative approach as the most suitable.<sup>[21]</sup> As noted by Denzin and Lincoln,<sup>[22]</sup> the design enables researchers to obtain in-depth data about the issue under study.

### **Study Site**

The study was carried out in the North and South Tongu districts of the Volta Region of Ghana. The region is considered a recruitment zone and at the same time a destination area for children trafficked for fishing purposes within the country. The Volta Region stretches from the east coast to central Ghana. The region is inhabited by 8.6% of the total population of Ghana.<sup>[23]</sup> An estimated 73.0% of the inhabitants live in rural areas, while 41.1% of the population are children between ages 0-14 years.<sup>[24]</sup> Although there are other districts within the region where rescued children have been returned, the lead researcher, able to communicate in the language of the selected area, influenced the choice of the two districts. Data was therefore collected in Ewe and Ga and later transcribed into English.

### **Study Participants**

A total of 24 reintegrated children between the ages of 10 and 18 years, comprising 16 boys and 8 girls, were sampled purposively based on the fact that they have knowledge of the phenomenon being explored. All study participants were rescued and returned by the same organization. Although 43 individuals were identified, only 24 were within the age limit set by the study. There were younger children, and despite the availability of counselling services, the researchers felt it was not in the best interest of the younger children to be involved. A number of the children had also been returned to the fishing villages between the field familiarization and the onset of the interview. Using an existing contact that the lead researcher had with an international anti-trafficking organization and a local rescue organization in Ghana, the researchers were able to embark on a 1-week field familiarization with each of the follow-up teams of the 2 anti-trafficking organizations.

It is normal to find an international NGO (INGO) collaborating with a local NGO (LNGO) in anti-trafficking activities. While the study cannot comment on the funding of the INGO, the LNGO contacted for the study was financially supported by the INGO to assist in returning participants to their communities after rescue and rehabilitation. The study selected this INGO not only because of existing contact, but because of its collaboration with LNGOs, first, to rescue the children from the fishing villages along Lake

Volta and, second, to assist in the return and reintegration process. Though the initial return process is embarked upon by both the INGO and LNGO, the LNGO visits the participants weekly compared with the monthly visit by the INGO. The anti-trafficking activities undertaken by the LNGO with regards to the participants were financially covered by the INGO.

Following the 2 teams on visits to the various communities where the children were reintegrated, the researchers observe interaction between the follow-up teams and the reintegrated children as well as the services provided them. The choice of the study area informed the choice of the INGO and LNGO. All the participants of the study were rescued and returned to their communities through the effort of the INGO contacted. This process helped the researchers acquaint themselves with the many reintegrated children, some of whom were later selected for the study with permission from the organizations and later the parents of the children whom we got to know during the familiarization time.

Though many children had returned from fishing communities along Lake Volta, not all were included in the study. Inclusion was based on the fact that a participant:

- (a) was trafficked into a fishing community along Lake Volta;
- (b) was rescued, rehabilitated, and reunited with a family; and
- (c) was younger than 18 years of age.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Using semi-structured questions, participants were engaged in an in-depth interview for data generation. This gave participants time to express themselves at their own pace. In addition, the researchers could seek further explanation from the children on their experiences.<sup>[25]</sup> Themes such as the children's description of their return to their individual communities, activities engaged in after return, access to education, and living conditions were explored.

The interviews were conducted in the homes of the children with their legal guardian/parents' permission but not in their presence. This was meant to avoid interruption and possible intimidation by the parents. Each interview lasted 45 to 90 minutes.

The interviews were conducted and audio-recorded in Ewe and Ga--both Ghanaian languages--and later transcribed into English. The current study was part of a larger study that focused on the 3 phases of the children's lives: (a) experiences before trafficking, (b) experiences during trafficking, and c) experiences after trafficking. The third phase is the focus of this paper. Data for study was collected between 2012 and 2013 and resulted in a series of publications. Despite the lapse of time, nothing has changed in terms of legal provisions and policy implementation to improve conditions for the children.

Data was analyzed using the *framework* analytical tool. Methodically, it allows the analyst to move back and forth in structuring the data into themes without losing the core expressions within participant narratives. The approach was helpful in organizing the raw data according to themes, concepts, and emergent categories.<sup>[26]</sup>

## Ethical Consideration and Disclosure

The initial concern was sought from the international and local organizations that were in touch with the children. This was followed by seeking consent of the parents or the legal guardians of the children. Parental or guardian consent was verbal in the preferred language of the parent or guardian. A consent form was given out to those who preferred one. Among those who opted for the form, the study could not retrieve some of them after follow-up; hence, their wards were not involved in the study. This was explained to the children involved to their understanding. For most of the children above 10 years of age, their assent was sought before their inclusion in the study. The involvement of the children in the study was explained to them as voluntary, and they were encouraged to opt out at any stage if they were no longer interested. How confidentiality would be ensured was explained to the children, and their identity was also concealed by not attaching their names to their stories. Instead, numbers were used and later taken off.

Ethical approval for the entire study was obtained from Queen's University Belfast, under whose auspices the study was carried out. As mentioned earlier, the study was part of a larger study. The larger study was partially supported by the Research Forum for the Child at Queen's University. The usage of the lead author's existing contact also benefited the general study. While some of the contacts were developed during data collection for her master's thesis on causes of child trafficking in Ghanaian fishing villages, others were a result of her past work relationships between 2006 and 2007.

## Findings

The study found that 14 out of the 24 participants were reunited with their biological parents who trafficked them, with 7 more returned to kinsmen other than biological parents, and 3 placed with foster parents. The children's narratives cover issues on education, exploitative work and other forms of physical abuse after reintegration as summarised in Table 1 below.

## Education after Reintegration

The narratives of the participants indicated that 2 of the 24 reintegrated children had completed primary education with the hope of continuing to the JHS, while 22 were still in primary school. The 2 awaiting entrance into JHS were among those returned to their biological parents in their homes of origin. Although away from the trafficking site, children returned home had to work to keep themselves in school. While the initial placement of the children in a community school was undertaken by the INGO with the provision of initial school supplies for the first 2.5 years, continuous support was the duty of parents. A female participant recounted:

*Weaving is the only work in this village that you can do to get money, but not every child does it. It is only those of us who have no one to provide for us that do it to get money for school, though it takes our study time at home from us* – Female, 14 years

The above narrative clearly indicates that some children returned from trafficking on Lake Volta to their communities of origin face the responsibility of providing educational materials for themselves. As the girl said, they work because they have no one to provide

for them, and the time that should be used for personal studies is invested in money-generating activities. It does not mean the children do not have parents who care about them, but these parents do not have the ability to meet all the needs of their children.

Further, the study found that though some reintegrated children qualify to be enrolled in school upon their return from trafficking, the process was delayed by the inability of their parents to financially support them.

*Mother did not place me in school immediately when I came back from fishing because she said she had no money to sew a uniform for me. I worked with her in the farm until she had the money to sew the uniform and I started school*

– Male, 13 years

### **Child Work after Trafficking**

To some extent, the work narratives and narratives based on education are intertwined. As noted above, some of the children had to work to support themselves in school. Nevertheless, it is important to pay specific attention to the kinds of work the children engaged in and note whether or not they are exploitative as fishing is. Given the narratives of the participants, the study found that children rescued from trafficking and reintegrated with families in local communities were engaged in work that could be considered exploitative according to the Children's Act.<sup>[9]</sup>

The children told stories of being engaged in farming, fishing, and other paid works such as weaving and selling. A 12-year-old boy said, "...[W]e have to set fish traps to catch fish for sale to provide our school needs and buy food at school. Our parents feed us twice a day, morning and evening, but we have to provide lunch for ourselves." This voice suggests that for the children to escape hunger in the afternoon, they needed to work (go fishing) for money.

Adding his voice, a 13-year-old boy explained, "...[S]ince we came back to our parents, we pay our own examination fees by setting fish traps and selling the catch. Education is free now, so we do not pay school fees." Setting a fish trap involves cutting palm branches or other woods that could be weaved into a cage-like structure. This structure is then placed on the floor of a flowing river, which could be deep. All these activities involve cutting tools like the cutlass, which could endanger the child.

For children returned to farming communities, the study found they also engaged in farming to provide for themselves. While 3 of the returned children farmed alongside their parents on the family farm, another farmed for community members for direct payment. Farming alongside a parent could expose a child to danger depending on the tools being used. Farm tools in most rural communities have sharp edges such as cutlasses and hoes that could inflict injury if not properly handled. In Ghana, people who farm for others for money are usually referred to as laborers. Such labor involves working in the scorching sun and sometimes without food. A 14-year-old boy said, "I am in school, but I also farm for people for money to provide for myself."

The study also found that 6 of the children who returned to local communities were engaged in weaving. Two of the participants mentioned:

*Apart from household chores, I weave mats to pay my examination fee at school.... It is the only work in the community for both adults and children. --Male, 12 years*



*I weave mat to help provide food for the house while my mother pays my examination fee at school. --Female, 11 years*

Meanwhile, another participant noted:

*...some of the work, I think we should not be made to do them because we are young, but our parents force us. There are times we are made to work long hours in the farm on school days. --Male 12 years*

The engagement of the children in farm work for long hours on school days means the children on some days missed school. In another narrative, a participant mentioned:

*I sell at the police barrier on the main road of the town at weekends. It is a scary job because you have to be running after moving cars for passengers to buy, but I have to do it because my mother is not working. I have to sell to earn money to feed myself and my brother at school. --Female 12 years*

Living in a house close to a police barrier on a major road linking two cities, the child sells at the police barrier to support his mother to whom he was returned. The dangers of running after vehicles, which briefly stop for inspection by the police, are enormous for a child.

The work narratives of the children reflect a picture of 3 categories of children: those who work after school hours at the expense of personal studies; those who work during school hours on certain days at the expense of being in class; and those who work on weekends. None of these options is in the best interest of the child as the activities they engaged in are exploitative.

### **Abuse: Physical, Verbal, and Emotional**

Of the 24 children who were returned to local communities under the care of parents and guardians, 2 children recounted incidents of physical abuse. In a lengthy story, a boy told of his rescue and contact with his current foster family.

*I was rescued from the fishing village and given to madam [foster mother] whose husband and children only come on visit. When I met the husband, he told me he does not like me ... and sent me out of the family apartment to sleep in an isolated storeroom not well ventilated. Madam asked me to come back to the room I was given in the family apartment...but at night, her husband came to pull me out of bed onto the floor in anger and pushed me out of the family house to go and sleep in the storeroom. He threatened to beat me if I return to the family house. Madam witnessed the incident but said nothing. I slept in the storeroom and woke up as usual to sweep the compound alone. Since then the man does not relate with me well, but I could not talk about it with madam. Their actions made me very scared and intimidated to a point that, when I accidentally broke a glass, I could not own up. I only confessed to madam when a representative of the NGO that gave me to her came to the house.... I was falsely accused by madam's children within the time of their visit. Madam herself has cursed me based on her children's false allegation.... She told me*

*the day I steal anything belonging to her, I will continue stealing until I die or be caught and imprisoned. I was hurt because I have never stolen from them.... I do not steal. She also said I am an animal unworthy of living in her house. She said she has regretted taking me in because she is looking for a human to live with and not a death trap like me. She said many things which hurt very much, but I had nothing to say. I have taken all her insults, but was most hurt when she told me the amount of food I eat is more than what her children eat. I felt sad that day because I am not sure it would have been so bad with my parents.... Madam has slapped me on many occasions...and asked if I thought the food I was eating in the house came from the air. --Male, 14 years*

Another boy added....

*A few days ago, I slept without food because madam did not allow me to pick soup for my dinner as we cook separately.... I sometimes go to school without food and without pocket money. If not for my friend, I would have stayed those days in school without food. Should I get money for transport I will go to my father. I am not worried about the work this woman gives me, but her behavior is very wicked. I would not want to go back to my master so if I get money, I will take a route that leads to my parents. The NGO has promised to remove me from this woman, but it has been sometime, and nothing is being done to that effect. --Male, 13 years.*

The stories of the 2 boys above is worthy of note. It raised the question of safety and care after reintegration with foster parents. As indicated by the 13-year-old, he is not comfortable with his situation and would prefer to go back to his father, who gave him to the fisherman.

Another child who cited abuse in his story was a 10-year-old boy. Sitting in front of his aunt's kitchen, where he sleeps at night with his sister, he showed us a thin mat on the cold cement floor that serves as their bed. (Meanwhile, his aunt and her son sleep in a well-roofed family house a short distance away.) For a cover, he had a piece of cotton cloth that could not possibly withstand the night's cold, despite the hot climate in Ghana. Although the kitchen had a door, the windows were covered with torn plastic. In his hands that morning were a pair of flip-flops, which he was stitching for another child. Apparently, that is what he does for money to buy food at school and after school as he awaits the evening food from his aunt's kitchen. He said:

*Living with aunt is okay, just that sometimes she beats us based on lies told against us by her son. She also insults us and says things like can't my father send us food? In all it is okay, but I have told my sister I would have loved us to be alone in a rented house so that our aunt will stop insulting our parents over food. --Male, 10 years.*

He added ...

*I returned from trafficking with a cough. Sleeping on the cold floor makes it worse, but my health insurance card has also expired. My aunt is not ready to renew ours, but she has*

*renewed her son's. The NGO that brought us here has also promised many times, but they are not doing anything about it.*

In Ghana, health insurance cards are renewed by paying a required amount of money. For this boy to have his card renewed to access health care without paying directly, he needed the help of his aunt or the NGO that rescued him. At the time of the interview, the NGO had no plans to renew health insurance cards for returned children. The boy's desire was to be taken from the care of his aunt, given the verbal abuse over food.

There is, however, one participant whose story gives hope in fostering victims of child trafficking. He said ...

*I was initially returned to my aunt with my brother, but later I had a foster father, so I left my aunt to stay with my foster father. I am happy with my foster father because he is very kind. With my aunt, she got a job for all of us to earn money after school. I farmed for people when I was with her, but I do not do that any longer because my foster father provides my needs. --Male, 10 years*

The study further noted that children returned home could have had their needs met had there been external support, as indicated in the story of one participant who had a foreign support. She said:

*Compared to the fishing village, I am comfortable living with my mother. I sleep where I chose to sleep at home. I am also schooling for a better future, so I cannot abandon it and go back to where I suffered without receiving any payment. Now every month, there is someone who helps with the provision of what I need – Female, 12 years*

The 12-year-old girl was pleased with her circumstance because her support was not totally left to her parents. She receives monthly support from a foreign donor. Donor programs are operated by some NGOs to provide continuous support for returned children. Of the 24 participants, only 1 child had foreign support.

It was noted on the field familiarization phase that NGO workers paid more attention to children with donor support than to those without. This is because some donors require a monthly update on the child they support. In the case of the 12-year-old above, her donor supporter provided her with a bicycle, which she rides to school in a nearby village, while the other children walk to school. Therefore, her perception of the home differs from many of her colleagues to an extent that she wonders why some are re-trafficked.

*Many of the children returned to this village have gone back to where they were rescued from. I do not know what discouraged them from staying in this community that they had to return to the suffering they were rescued from. For me, nothing will compel me to go back into that servitude. Even if I have no food to eat, I will stay in this village. --Female, 12 years*

The certainty of the 12-year-old to stay in her village may last as long as she has donor support. What comes after the support, which is normally not more than 2 years, is not yet known. Will she go back into trafficking, or will she will engage in

similar exploitative economic activities as some of the children? Evidently, for those who do not have foreign support, the study found the challenging conditions at home causes some to be re-trafficked. The study notes that 4 of the children identified during the field familiarization phase from 3 different homes had been re-trafficked by their parents. In one instance, the sibling of re-trafficked children said:

*My parents gave birth to 13 children out of which 3 died. Currently there are only 5 of us living with our parents. The rest have returned to the fishing village. Recently one of my sisters that the NGO brought back was asked by my uncle to come and help him in the fishing village, so that every year he will send my father money. --*  
Male, 11 years

It is clear that, based on the circumstance prevailing in the homes children are returned to, there is the likelihood that some will be further exploited or even re-trafficked. However, well-resourced homes, like that of the single foster father and the child receiving donor support, could protect reintegrated victims of child trafficking.

Table 1: Summary of Post-trafficking Experiences of Rescued Children

No.	Age (yrs.)	NGO Rescue	Returned to			Activities					Abuses					
			Parent	Relations	Foster Parents	Household chores	School/ Training	Fishing	Farming	Other paid work	Physical	Emotional & Psychological	Verbal	Isolated	Self-Provision	Neglect
1	15	√	√b			√	√			√					√	
2	12	√	√b			√		√		√					√	
3	10	√	√b			√	√	√							√	
4	12	√	√b			√	√	√							√	
5	12	√	√b			√	√		√p							
6	16	√	√b			√	√			√					√	
7	13	√			√f	√	√									
8	15	√			√f	√	√				√	√	√	√		
9	12	√	√b			√	√		√p							
10	11	√		√r						√	√		√	√	√	√
11	13	√		√r		√	√			√					√	√
12	16	√			√f	√	√		√						√	
13	10	√	√b			√	√									
14	8	√		√r		√	√									
15	14	√		√r		√	√									
16	13	√		√r		√	√									
17	15	√		√r		√	√									
18	14	√	√b				√			√						
19	13	√	√b				√									
20	15	√	√b			√	√									
21	17	√		√r		√	√									
22	17	√	√b		√	√	√									
23	16	√	√b		√	√	√									
24	17	√	√b		√	√	√									

**Key:**

√b = Children returned to biological parents.

√r = Children returned to a relative other than biological parents

√f = Children returned to a foster care

√p = Children engaged in activity with parents

**Discussion**

The study aimed to explore issues surrounding the education, work, and further abuses suffered by victims of child trafficking who were reintegrated into local communities in the Volta region of Ghana. It employed in-depth interviews of 24 participants across 2 districts. The study found that how each participant experienced the core themes--education, exploitative work, and other abuses--depends on the conditions in the home to which the child is returned. While some homes supported participants in escaping work and abuse, others could not do so, given poor prevailing conditions.

As argued by Oude Breuil,<sup>[27]</sup> the home of origin may not be the best place to return victims of trafficking. This study found evidence to support that argument, in that some returned children had to engage in exploitative work to provide for their school needs and to support poor parents in providing food for the household. Work such as farm laboring, weaving, fishing, and selling are engaged in by the children to earn money. In effect, the return of these children does not, necessarily suggest an end to their exploitation.

The adverse effect of combining education with work has been noted in several studies. According to Hamenoo et. Al,<sup>[6]</sup> Basu and Tzannatos,<sup>[28]</sup> and Heady,<sup>[29]</sup> children who work and attend school have both activities competing for their time, and usually their education falls behind as work takes most of their time. Omokhodion and Uchendu<sup>[30]</sup> also noted in their study of school-age children in Nigeria that child work disrupts education.

Our study also noted that, despite the institution of fCUBE to make basic education free for all Ghanaian children, some children in rural areas still have to pay educational levies instituted by local school authorities. Coupled with poverty and large family size, parents are overburdened by these levies and are unable to support their children in school.

Further, the study noted that the quality of life enjoyed by children who were returned to foster parents varied considerably. For some, placement with foster carers provided the opportunity to settle into a safe haven, but for others it meant enduring further abuse. As stated by Kelly,<sup>[31]</sup> victims of trafficking returning to their home of origin often face psychological, family-related, health, and financial problems, making reintegration difficult.

As evidenced in the children's narratives, some of those who were returned to foster parents were also physically abused. These findings were first shared with the INGO for further intervention. This led to a change of home for one of the children living with a foster parent. In Ghana, the physical abuse of children in all settings is frowned upon but not explicitly banned by law. In the 2020 country report on Ghana, the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children<sup>[32]</sup> encouraged the Ghana government to amend article 13, clause 2 of the Children's Act. This clause states that "no correction of a child is justifiable which is unreasonable in kind or in degree according to the age, physical and mental condition of the child and no correction is justifiable if the child by reason of tender age or otherwise is incapable of understanding the purpose of the correction". The call for amendment is meant to clearly state that corporal punishment of children is unlawful. In the absence of governmental long-term shelters for survivors of child trafficking, the willingness of some community members become a valuable resource to anti-trafficking organizations. However, regular evaluations of these homes by INGO is thus needed.

Further, our study found that some reintegrated children have been re-trafficked back to the fishing communities where they were rescued from. This agrees with the fact stressed by the Danish Immigration Service that rescued victims could be re-trafficked if returned to the same environment.<sup>[33]</sup> Our study also found that foreign donor supports could serve as an external intervention to improve conditions in the homes that trafficked victims are returned to. These supports, however, do not last long. Typically, rescue organizations monitor and support reintegrated children for about 2 1/2 years.<sup>[16]</sup>

According to Littenberg and Baldwin,<sup>[34]</sup> many of the problems victims of trafficking suffer while in bondage continue to negatively impact their lives even if they are able to leave their trafficking situation. These authors noted that chronic medical conditions like

diabetes, asthma, and hypertension are inadequately treated while the victim is being trafficked. This was confirmed by the current study in the case of the returned victim with severe cough. However, the study further noticed that lingering problems of victims of trafficking are not only health related but could be physical and emotional. As noted, some of the participants continue to suffer physical and emotional abuses in the homes they have been returned to, leading one participant to express the desire to return to the fishing village.

### Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, there are several regions and communities to which children rescued from trafficking have been resettled. Given the distinct cultural practices of every community in Ghana, activities that children could engage in for money may differ.

Also, the study was limited to one INGO known to be well-endowed and the LNGO it collaborates with in countering child trafficking in Ghana. The experiences of the study participants may differ from that of other children rescued by other organizations, depending on the organization's resources. In addition, younger children were not involved in the study; hence, findings could not be generalized to all reintegrated children.

Notwithstanding the above weaknesses, the study sheds light on the post-trafficking experiences of some rescued children, thereby presenting the home as not necessarily the safest place to return all survivors of child trafficking.

### Conclusion

Determining whether the home is the best place for a rescued child to return to depends on the prevailing conditions there--the specific economic, social, and emotional circumstances and the resources. While a financially stable home with loving guardians will make a good home for a returned child, a financially poor home might result in children having to endure continued hardship if they must work to provide for themselves. In both scenarios, an insensitive guardian with a difficult personality can expose the children to further abuse.

However, the home could generally be a safe place for child survivors of trafficking should state institutions be well-resourced to safeguard the welfare of all children. Currently in Ghana, the general public is relied upon to report child abuse to the department of social welfare and community development. The department has the mandate to assign a probation officer to investigate and bring the case before a family tribunal to determine the placement of the child.<sup>[9]</sup> Although these provisions are made, the Children's Act of 1998 has 3 placement options: (a) an approved residential home; (b) with an approved fit person; or (c) at the home of a parent, guardian, or relative<sup>[9]</sup>. Conditions in governmental residential homes are not the best, so anti-trafficking agencies are left with options (b) or (c), which are also often inadequate in cases of returned children.

In view of the findings, the study therefore recommends the development of a holistic intervention package in collaboration with the government of Ghana and the NGOs to:

- (a) Conduct an assessment of the home to which the child is returning to.
- (b) Arrange a full educational scholarship package for all reintegrated children to cover at least basic school education.
- (c) Ensure a continuous follow-up of the children reintegrated into communities.
- (d) Facilitate an increase in foreign donor support for victims of child trafficking.

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